

Available online at <http://www.ijims.com>

ISSN: 2348 – 0343

## **Adventures of Huckleberry Finn - An Expression of Anti-racism**

Laila V.

Department of English ,Malabar College of Advanced Studies, Kerala, India.

### **Abstract**

This paper studies Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn as an antiracist novel. The novel was banned often as a racist novel. The article perceives the so called racist issues in the novel from an antiracist angle by focusing on the realistic narration of the novel.

**Key Words:** Racism, Stereotypes, Ideology .

### **Article**

When Adventures of Huckleberry Finn<sup>1</sup> was published, readers of Mark Twain expected a sequel to the Tom Sawyer novel. The critic Jane Smiley says, "It is not a boy's novel, like Tom Sawyer, but a man's novel about real moral dilemma and growth."<sup>2</sup> But the second novel was more interesting and more powerful than the former. It was more than a boy's book. Lionel Trilling says:

Tom Sawyer novel has the truth of honesty--what it says about things and feelings is never false and always both adequate and beautiful. Huckleberry Finn novel has this kind of truth, too, but it has also the truth of moral passion; it deals directly with the virtue and depravity of man's heart. The truth of Huckleberry Finn novel is a more intense one, fiercer and more complex.<sup>3</sup>

Since the novel is a devastating critique of racism, it is no wonder that its truth is fiercer and more complex. But half of the American public mistook the author's real intention in the novel. The work is a realistic portrayal of the 1830 southern American society which believed slavery as a system ordained by god. As it is a realistic portrayal, Twain copies down all the traditions and customs of the society as such. Most of the reading public was unable to realize the irony that Twain used in the novel to attack racism. They alleged that he was a racist novelist and that his novel was a racist work.

Many debates have continued about whether the frequent use of the word nigger in the Huckleberry Finn novel makes it a racist book or unsuitable for the education of children. But this problem has to be looked at in the context of the novel as a whole.

In the novel, Twain portrays a racist society of 1830s in an American southern state, Hannibal. The word nigger might have been offensive at the time of the publication of the novel. But, it was a part of the language of the society of the 1830s. Huck, a close companion of Jim, also uses the word in the novel. But it is not to be forgotten that he is a boy who has imbibed the traditions and values of that society. When the whites use the word to refer to a black, it reflects the narrow perspective of the whites rather than the false inferiority of the blacks. Twain satirically presents the society that classifies

the blacks like Jim as less than human. The word nigger is central to portraying both society and the people in it with accuracy.

The word nigger was used to mean to deny the personhood and humanity of the person to whom it refers. It was a racist slur that could hurt the black children, as they listened to their teachers reading the word aloud in the classroom. The least, the black parents pained by the slur could do, were to go out and ban the book that contained the word. The point to be taken to consideration is that Twain was talking about the customs of a society that existed half a century before the publication of the novel. If the society of 1884 could not endure that word, it shows that America was still unable to eradicate racism completely from among its people. The word nigger is offensive. So is slavery. Only when people are ready to conceive racism as a part of history can they stop debating about the presence of this offensive word in the novel. The book has to be taught in the context of history of American race relations. Students should be taught to grapple with the book's irony. Then the novel becomes "an enormously important book to keep in classrooms, an important weapon in the ongoing battle against racism"<sup>4</sup>

Another reason for attacking the book as a racist one was the stereotypical images of Jim in the novel. But the interpretations which read Jim as a merely superstitious, illiterate black are part of a narrow, limiting reading. Jim's folk beliefs have naturalness, simplicity and truth in it. When Jim seeks truth and logic in everything, he becomes a strong contrast and a solution to all the hypocritical the whites in the novel. The stereotypical characterization is the "only possible starting point"<sup>5</sup> for a white author who attempts to deal with the black character a century ago. Twain portrays Jim as a black who does not understand the racist underpinnings of an ideology that prompts him to escape. In 1830, the whites' tendency to make everything right for themselves was not supposed to be questioned by a black. But the white writer in Twain is not blind to the humanity in Jim. There are many episodes which highlight the humanity in Jim.

One main reason for attacking the prose as a racist work was because of the ambivalent attitude of Huck towards Jim. Many critics have blamed Huck for keeping some distance from Jim. He is not as sincere to Jim as the white girl Amy is to Sethe in Toni Morrison's Beloved.<sup>6</sup>

In her essay, "Was Huck Black?", Fishkin argues that Huck is a black boy. According to her, Huck's voice is greatly affected by Jim.<sup>7</sup> His language and his ability to understand the blacks take him more nearly to a figure of black boy than to that of a white boy.

Toni Morrison analyses Huck and says he has the attitude of a boy brought up in white American culture itself. She analyses Huck in his conversations with Jim. In one scene, Huck becomes silent when Jim talks about his plans of saving his family from the bondage of slavery. Huck does not express to Jim his dilemma about his decision to help him. In fact, he is unable to express honestly his feelings to Jim. Morrison states:

Or consider Huck's inability to articulate his true feeling for Jim to anybody other than the reader. When he "humble himself" in apology to Jim for the painful jokes he plays on him, we are not given the words... when Jim repeatedly iterates his love, the depth of Huck's feeling for Jim is stressed, underscored and rendered unimpeachable by Twain's calculated use of speechlessness. . . . these silences do not appear to me

of merely historical accuracy--a realistic portrait of how a white child would respond to a black slave: they seem to be expert technical solutions to the narrative complexities.<sup>8</sup>

Huck's speechlessness reflects his racial prejudices towards Jim. But at the same time, he loves Jim and likes to be with him. However, he is unable to get rid of the social conviction that slavery is a system ordained by God. Huck's dual attitude prompts Morrison to say that Huck has "a voice composed of black and white sound"<sup>9</sup>. But this ambivalent attitude of Huck does not make the novel a racist one.

Twain is successful in copying the white boy of Hannibal in 1840. He has employed a racially inflicted language to attack racism itself. The author does not idealize the moral dilemma which Huck undergoes in his defiance of society and religion. The satirical tone is very clear. He questions the morality of the society which continues to uphold worn out customs. Huck himself is satirized for delaying in his decisions to help his fellow beings.

Many readers misinterpreted the last part of the novel as a sequence of scenes with racist overtones. According to them, Twain's racist attitude is reflected here as he allows Jim to be reduced to a passive slave at the hands of Tom Sawyer. But Twain is actually showing the irony of a country founded in freedom, but continued to deny freedom to many of its citizens. As the last part is analyzed, it becomes clear that the work provides "such a canny and disturbing sense of both the dream of freedom and the betrayals of that dream that the post-Reconstruction era engendered"<sup>10</sup>

The novel tells more about the social situation of 1880s than that of the 1830s. The work has to be understood as a satire that "voices encoded criticism of American relations in the post-Reconstruction south"<sup>11</sup>

The Civil War (1861-65) was fought to secure the right of freedom for black Americans. But even after a century, they were forced to go through pains and troubles just to secure rights that were supposedly theirs already. During the period Twain wrote the novel (1876-83), all the gains that the blacks had won during Reconstruction were being overturned. In 1877, the federal troops that had been safeguarding the rights of the blacks in the South were in effect withdrawn. Thousands of Afro-Americans were effectively enslaved through such means as sharecropping, lynching etc. The Supreme Court's decision in 1883 to overturn the Civil Right Act of 1875 again worsened the condition of the black Americans. They were denied their enfranchised citizenship which they had won after the Civil War. If Jim's chained condition at the end of Huckleberry Finn novel forced Bernard DeVoto to call the end a chilling descent of the novel, it actually mirrors the chilling descent that happened in history.<sup>12</sup>

In the last part, Jim seems to agree with Huck that Tom knows best. He is denied of the information he needs and is forced to perform a series of meaningless and exhausting tasks. Ever after proving himself to be the embodiment of moral nature, Jim is denied respect and freedom. The legally freed black man is still in chains. But the interesting thing is that all these actions happen not at the hands of any fools or frauds like the Duke and the King, but at the initiative of a respectable Tom Sawyer and churchgoing citizens like the Phelps and their neighbors. Huck's promise of liberty to Jim is failed in the end. When Huck keeps silence on Jim's victimized condition, when Phelps and the neighbors chain Jim, even after knowing him to be a loyal person, the promise of justice is failed. Jim's still chained condition reflects the

nation's failure to make its promise of freedom to the blacks a reality. What is seen in the last part is not a series of racist scenes. The indignities inflicted on the freed Jim tells the history of post Emancipation race relations in the United States.

All the white characters in the novel are racists. Even the seemingly good people like Mary Wilks, Phelps family and the like are unable to see the blacks as humans. When pap Finn rants against a black college professor from Ohio whose vote was as good as his own, it reflects the white's anxiety over the black political power after the Civil War. In such a society, a black man could do nothing to make the white society conscious of his role in building the American culture. Twain who knew the perfect pitch of racist America had realized this fact. In the novel, Jim's sacrifice of his freedom for helping Tom never brings a change in the strong racist attitudes. In order to expose the viciousness of the white world view, Twain adopted a realist portrayal in his novel. He wanted the readers to make the judgments themselves. For this purpose, he made the narrator of his novel a child who fails to judge his society as wrong.

Throughout the novel, Twain satirizes all the whites who attend the church sermons which state the importance of love and brotherhood in a democratic society. In their practical life, all those people are unable to see the blacks as their brothers. Since they hate to see a freed black man, they always keep him in chains. It is clearly demonstrated in the novel Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. It is not only a study on the race relations of 1830. The work equally talks about the racist cruelty that still prevailed in the post- Reconstruction era. It exposes the cruelty and senselessness of white racists. The novel, undoubtedly, is an antiracist work and is an extraordinary work of literature.

As a story which deals with one of the major problems of America, the work is still very significant in her literature. American society still consists of many Huckleberry Finns who are hesitant to receive the blacks with a broad mind.

Racism is a constant theme in American literature. It is interesting to note that a major proportion of the published writing of Afro-Americans, even when not directly countering racist mythology, has been concerned thematically with the issues of race. But it is hardly surprising that it occurs in a country where black people still struggle to assert their individuality. Though the black creativity had passed through many strong stages of development which resulted in the origin of the Harlem Renaissance (1919-40), Negritude movement (1930), NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of the Colored People (1909), National Urban League (1910) etc, the economical and political constraints on Afro-American could not find any permanent end. When Martin Luther King expressed a dream of a day when black and white children would hold their hands together, and even when Langston Hughes sang "I, too, sing America / I'm the darker brother," there was a strong tinge of hope for a day when whites would realize that the most binding element in all human beings is one and the same, love. But when Afro-Americans have to manage processions in post modern America to show the black pride and solidarity (Million Man March in **1995**, Million Woman March in 1997 etc) to the government, it repeatedly poses the unresolved problem in America, i.e., racism.

## References

1. Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. New York: The Macmillan Company;1962.
2. Smiley, Jane. "Say It A'int Huck: Second Thoughts on Mark Twain's Masterpiece." *Harper Magazine*. 292. Jan. 1996. 16 Sep 2007 <[www.fhs.fhs.fuhsd.org/AM\\_LIT-/READINGS/UNIT\\_2/fmnsmiley/](http://www.fhs.fhs.fuhsd.org/AM_LIT-/READINGS/UNIT_2/fmnsmiley/)>.

3. Trilling, Lionel. An Introduction to Huckleberry Finn. In: Lettis, Richard, Robert F. McDonnell, and William E. Morris (eds.) *Huck Finn and his Critics*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962. 326-337.
4. Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. "Mark Twain's America." *Authors Corner*. April 1997 .Online Newshour.28 Sept. 2007<[www.pbs.org/newshour/authors-comer/jan-june-97/Fishkin](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/authors-comer/jan-june-97/Fishkin)>.
5. Hoffman, Daniel G. From Black Magic — and White — in Huckleberry Finn. In: Henry Nash Smith, Mark Twain.(ed.) *A Collection of Critical Essays*.. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, mc, 1963. 101-111.
6. Fukase, Yukiko. "'Signifyin(g)' upon Huck Finn: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as a Cultural Artifact." 17 Oct. 2007 <[www.flet.keio.ac.jp/articles/colJ\\_FukaseYukiko.pdf](http://www.flet.keio.ac.jp/articles/colJ_FukaseYukiko.pdf)>.
7. Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. "Mark Twain's America." *Authors Corner*. April 1997 .Online Newshour.28 Sept. 2007<[www.pbs.org/newshour/authors-comer/jan-june-97/Fishkin](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/authors-comer/jan-june-97/Fishkin)>.
8. Morrison, Toni. *Black Matters*. In: Philomena Essed, David Theo Goldberg(eds.) *Race Critical Theories*. USA: BlackwellPublishers; 2002.p.265-282.
9. *Ibid.*, pp 265-282
10. Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. "Mark Twain's America." *Authors Corner*. April 1997 .Online Newshour.28 Sept. 2007<[www.pbs.org/newshour/authors-comer/jan-june-97/Fishkin](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/authors-comer/jan-june-97/Fishkin)>.
11. *Ibid.*, <[www.pbs.org/newshour/authors-comer/jan-june-97/Fishkin](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/authors-comer/jan-june-97/Fishkin)>.
12. DeVoto, Bernard. *Mark Twain's America*. In: Lettis Richard, Robert F. McDonnell, William E. Morris (eds.) *Huck Finn and his Critics*. New York: The Macmillan Company; 1962.p.307-316.